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SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO CROATIA

Classified By: Ambassador Robert A. Bradtke for reasons 1.4(b/d)

¶1. (C) Croatia is eagerly awaiting your visit, Mr. President. Your appearance and remarks in St. Mark's Square, the stage for so much Croatian history, will be a celebration of Croatia's invitation to join NATO. For a country that suffers from a chronic sense of being under-appreciated by its European neighbors to the north, your visit will also be welcomed as recognition of all that Croatia has achieved since its independence in 1991. And, equally important, your visit will be an opportunity for the Croatian Government and people to thank you for being a friend of Croatia.

¶2. (C) Your decision to honor Croatia with a visit has been especially warmly greeted by Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, as he begins a narrowly-won second term in office. The Prime Minister frequently recalls to me how much he valued his Oval Office meeting with you in October 2006 and his conversation with you in Tirana last summer. His only disappointment is that he will not be able to show you the beauties of the Adriatic and his hometown, Split. President Mesic, whom you have met in New York during UN General Assembly sessions, also recognizes the historic nature of your visit, and is keen to share the spotlight.

¶3. (C) While President Clinton made a brief stopover at Zagreb's airport to meet President Tudman in 1996, your visit is the first true visit by an American President to Croatia. Riding into the center of Zagreb, you will see signs of economic growth and new wealth. However, only fifteen years ago, Croatia was the scene of a terrible ethnic conflict, where 13,000 people were killed, hundreds of thousands of refugees forced to leave their homes, and the economy devastated. In one of the war's darker moments, the building in which you will meet Prime Minister Sanader was bombed by the Yugoslav Air Force.

¶4. (C) With American and European help and under the leadership of both President Mesic and Prime Minister Sanader, Croatia has made great strides to shake off the narrow nationalist vision that dominated politics in the 1990's, reintegrate its Serb minority, strengthen its democracy, and play a positive role in the region. Croatia has opened its economy, built a network of modern roads, and attracted millions of tourists to its spectacular coast. Its decision to deploy troops to Afghanistan, and its broader commitment to participate actively in multilateral peacekeeping was seminal -- Croatia shifted from placing demands on the international community for support to contributing to addressing problems elsewhere. Your visit is seen by Croatians from nearly all walks of life as affirming that Croatia is no longer just a partner of necessity in addressing Balkan crises, but a full ally in tackling global challenges.

15. (C) With no significant bilateral issues dividing us, your key messages at both your public events and private meetings with President Mesic and Prime Minister Sanader can focus on broader themes, looking to the future of Croatia and southeastern Europe:

-- First, you can congratulate Croatia, not just on securing an invitation to NATO, but on beginning to step up and assume its responsibilities as an ally. Croatia's 200 troops in Afghanistan, rising to 300 over the course of 2008, have performed well, and we want Croatia to do more. The country is also playing a constructive role in the UN Security Council, where its own direct experience with handling conflict and addressing post-conflict reconstruction gives it a unique and valuable perspective. Words of recognition and praise from you will make the Croatians more responsive to our future requests for help.

-- Second, you can stress the need to keep up the reform effort. An invitation to join NATO is not the end. Reforms must continue, not just to ensure that invitation turns into ratification, but more importantly to ensure that Croatia joins the alliance as a capable ally. Transforming its military is not the work of a few years, and overcoming the legacy of forty years of socialism and five years of war is not done in just a decade. Most Croatians understand this already, but the message should be reinforced.

-- Finally, you can stress how Croatia's success in transforming itself after several years of difficult conflict sends an important message to other countries of the region. The hard work of economic reform, establishing rule of law, and dealing with war crimes pays off and earns the reward of acceptance into transatlantic institutions. Each country of southeastern Europe is different, but Croatia has shown that

a region Churchill described as being cursed with too much history, now has the opportunity to write a new, more positive chapter.

16. (C) Mr. President, all of us at Embassy Zagreb look forward to your visit and will do our utmost to make it a success.
Bradtke